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ABSTRACT

North Carolina's Work First (WF) program, like other welfare reform programs, incorporates personal responsibility contracts; paid work, volunteer work, or school requirements; and time limitations. Using telephone interviews, this study examined perceptions of 31 former welfare recipients who were enrolled in the North Carolina Work First (WF) program regarding their work situation, the transition to work, balancing work and family responsibilities, and suggestions for providing information to communities interested in similar programs. Interviews were also conducted with 12 of the subjects' employers. Participants were identified by Department of Social Services (DSS) caseworkers. Findings indicated that in addition to added income and medical benefits, respondents noted self-esteem and belongingness from a supportive work environment as positive aspects of the program. Negative perceptions focused on transportation and child care difficulties, lack of time to accomplish household and family responsibilities, and adjusting to unfamiliar work expectations. Respondents agreed that in order to be successful with their work, adequate job preparation was essential. Personally strong motivation and drive joined emotional support from family, co-workers, and DSS as factors critical to success. Accessing transportation and child care, training opportunities, and community-based services provided additional support for workers. Results of employer interviews indicated that several were pleased with WF employee performance; others identified problems with personal difficulties and attendance. Advantages to hiring WF participants included worker commitment, DSS as extra support, and well-trained workers. Disadvantages included lack of skills, attendance problems, and transportation arrangements. Main reasons for turnover were dissatisfaction with the number of working hours, work preparedness and adjustment, and fear of loss of benefits. (Details on the sample and participants' responses are appended.) (KB)

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Work Front - Home Front

A Cooperative Extension Contribution to Work First in North Carolina

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WorkFront - HomeFront:
A report on Work First participant work family balance

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Workfront-Homefront

Executive Summary

Through a partnership developed between North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service and North Carolina Department of Social Services Human Resources Economic Independence unit, 31 people who had been receiving welfare benefits and who were enrolled in the North Carolina Work First program were interviewed by telephone. The purpose was to explore their perceptions about their new work situation, the transition to working, their assessment of how they balance work and family responsibilities, and to listen for suggestions of ways to provide information to communities interested in assisting in the welfare reform movement and in helping families become self-sufficient.

In addition to added income and medical benefits, respondents noted positive feelings of esteem and belongingness evolving out of a supportive work environment. Negative perceptions focused on difficulty with transportation and child care in addition to lacking time to accomplish household and family responsibilities and difficulty adjusting to unfamiliar work culture expectations.

In order to be successful with their work, respondents agreed that adequate job preparation, which includes communication skills and how to be a part of a work team, is essential. Personally strong internal motivation and drive join emotional support from family, co-workers, and the Department of Social Services as critical aspects to success. Accessing resources such as transportation and child care in addition to training opportunities and community-based services provide additional support to enable workers to manage their lives.

The full report provides multiple recommendations based on Work First responses as well as the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service Human Development unit's contribution to the state plan for self-sufficiency.

WorkFront - HomeFront:
A report on Work First participant work family balance

In North Carolina, the response to welfare reform is a program called Work First. Work First like other welfare reform programs incorporates personal responsibility contracts, paid work, volunteer work, or school requirements and time limitations. Across the state, local departments of social services are responding to diverse needs of their clientele.

Many welfare reform programs across the nation are seeking a resource mix -- to involve the larger community -- in taking responsibility for their local citizens in transition. Churches, civic organizations, Chambers of Commerce, and local businesses are being called upon and are beginning to respond to the Work First program. In keeping with this trend, Governor Hunt is seeking community partnerships between community agencies and organization to develop support systems to assist the welfare reform efforts and assure success for Work First participants. Some organizations would like to assist in some way, but do not know how to contribute nor have the fiscal or human resources to assist.

As part of this call for support, the human development unit of the Cooperative Extension Service housed at North Carolina State University approached the North Carolina Department of Social Services Human Resources Economic Independence unit in Raleigh, NC. Extension developed a proposal to assess the marks of success and the barriers to success in with workers in the Work First program. Based on this assessment, educational resources will be developed for use by community groups and organizations.

Method

Forty Work First participants who are beginning to transition from the welfare roles to mainstream workforce roles were identified by DSS case workers. Eight counties - -

five rural and four urban were selected with a target of three to five participants from each county to comprise the desired sample of half urban and half rural workers. Regional Department of Social Services Work First directors asked local case workers to suggest five clients each who met the criteria of being accessible by phone and being fully employed. The urban counties included Craven, Durham, Guilford, and Buncombe. Rural counties included Wilkes, Randolph, Cleveland, Moore, and Pender. A telephone survey was conducted with each respondent during January and February, 1997.

Open ended questions that were asked included some of the following: How long have you been working? What are the benefits and drawbacks of working? What other responsibilities besides work do you have? (children, spouse, elder care, health, etc.) What are the challenges in balancing work and home responsibilities? How do you rate your feelings about managing your life before you got this job? How would you rate it now? What served as an extra "push" for you to become employed? What has helped you the most on the job? Who do you turn to first for emotional support? What other kinds of information or support do you need? What advice do you have for other Work First recipients?

A letter introducing the project was sent two weeks prior to the telephone contact. The first contact was a scheduling call asking the Work First participant to schedule a convenient time to talk about their experiences.

Sample description

The original pool of respondents included 38 Work First participants with 20 urban and 18 rural. Thirty-one of the participants for this study (82%) were reached by telephone. Seven of the participants were unavailable. Reasons included three disconnected phones with no forwarding numbers, two people who was released from their jobs without home phones, and one who did not have a telephone and had a position driving a truck making her often unavailable by phone. One person was simply

not available at the times calls were placed.

The final Work First participants included 16 Euro-American females, 15 African American females, and one African American male for a total of thirty females and one male. Sixteen were from urban communities and 15 were from rural communities. Their ages ranged from 22 to 50 and their children's ages ranged from two years old to 17 years of age for a total of 57 children with each participant having at least one child. Twenty-seven were single parents and 4 were married. Although these is not complete data on their earnings, wages ranged from $3.00 to $11.00 per hour. Table 1 details the sample.

Most participants had been working full-time for a range of two weeks to two years with most working for four to six months. Some combined part time work with school or volunteer work and at least one person served as a volunteer for one month before being hired full-time. Jobs were very diverse including factory work, adult day care, child care, housekeeping, clerical, retail and working with a county or state agency.

Results

Perceptions and attitudes about working

A variety of perceptions and attitudes about their current work situation were shared by participants when they were asked about how it was going at work, what the benefits of working were, how it was going balancing work and other responsibilities, and how satisfied they were with child care arrangements and the process of finding child care.

Benefits/positive aspects

Over half of the participants gave strongly positive overall impressions of their work situation, while others gave more moderate indications of satisfaction with work. Specific positive aspects of working included *positive personal*

feelings, increased resources, positive worksite relationships, beneficial job aspects, and benefits for children and family.

Personal feelings involved factors such as increased self-esteem, self-confidence, independence, a "greater sense of belonging," a sense of accomplishment about being able to provide for the family, feeling like "an active member of society," enjoyment of being busy and working with people, and "the pleasure of knowing you can meet your needs." One participant stated:

> "to be independent, to carry your own load without depending on anyone – it makes you feel real good."

Increased resources included having more money, receiving benefits such as medical insurance and sick/vacation days, and being better able to support their family. Several respondents mentioned *positive relationships with supervisors and coworkers* as reasons for high levels of work satisfaction. Other *positive job-related aspects* included flexible and convenient hours, part-time work schedules, and enough work hours to earn more money.

The benefits of flexible or part-time work hours was usually tied to being able to better care for their children; these parents could be with their children when they were out of school, and could spend more time with them. One employer was flexible enough so that a participant's 14-year-old daughter could come to work with her when school was closed. Among other *benefits and positive aspects that involved children and family* concerns, parents mentioned that working allowed them to be a better example and "role model" for their children. In general, participants who used child care were satisfied with that care and did not have a difficult time finding it. Many participants also stated that they were able to balance work and family responsibilities fairly well, however the participants that were the most positive about this balance tended to have very reliable child care, a flexible employer in terms of child care concerns, or children who were able to take care of themselves.

Drawbacks/negative aspects

Drawbacks to working related to both *balancing work and family responsibilities and the nature of their jobs.* The primary area of concern among these workers involved balancing work and family with their other responsibilities. Many participants reported that their jobs interfered with time with their children, and that they lacked the time to accomplish all their family tasks, such as housework and errands. Many respondents also had other responsibilities besides their children and home-related tasks, including caring for aging parents, attending school, and being involved in the community. These parents reported a great deal of stress and exhaustion due to multiple time-consuming responsibilities, and often said they had no time for themselves. One parent felt remorse about not being able to pay enough attention to children and felt hurt by their frequent statements of "you're never here!" Another respondent said:

> "sometimes you wonder if there's any benefits of trying to do all this...I have times that I think I just cannot do it."

When participants discussed conflicts between work and parenting, they also noted difficulties with child care. One common concern was with leaving work to pick up a sick child from day care, taking a child to the doctor, or attending parent-teacher conferences. Each of these situations created problems with employers. Transportation difficulties exacerbated this problem; without a car or conveniently set up bus lines, dealing with a sick child from work or attending school appointments was very hard. In terms of child care, many parents mentioned problems finding the right child care center for their young children, difficulty paying for child care (often after having been terminated from child care assistance), problems finding after-school care for children over age 11. Several factors made the process of finding child care difficult, including not

having enough time or access to transportation in order to search for quality care, little assistance with this difficult decision, lack of availability of care for the hours worked, and having good day care within the school district since school buses don't transport children out of their district. Some parents mentioned that having to find good child care right as they were beginning to deal with juggling work and home responsibilities was difficult.

Several parents were not satisfied with their child care arrangements; some thought that their after-school care was not structured enough with too few activities, one mother felt that the home day care she used was too restrictive and did not provide enjoyable experiences for the children, and one mother had problems because the buses brought her child home before she could get off work. Examples of comments about child care were:

"Day care is a very big problem...there's not enough good day cares out there that are affordable, and it's very hard to find one."

"I hate that they have to even be in day care and after-school care, but I don't have a choice."

In addition to child and family issues, many participants discussed concerns related to the *nature of their jobs*. Several respondents were dissatisfied with their jobs since they lacked medical benefits and paid holidays, and were paid low wages. Other issues that were perceived as negative job characteristics were: difficulty meeting production standards, being in a temporary position, little room for advancement in the organization, and difficulty adjusting to work hours.

Barriers to success

When participants were asked to describe any barriers to their success at work, they mentioned the drawbacks stated previously in addition to *personal health and emotional concerns, interactions with supervisors and co-workers,*

and *the immediate removal of their benefits from DSS when they started working*. Personal concerns included illness, feeling stressed or discouraged with the job responsibilities, a fear of losing their job and having no benefits to live on (particularly in a temporary position), and the public stigma felt by being a welfare recipient.

Attitudes of and *interactions with co-workers* and supervisors was another common concern. Some respondents reported that co-workers were not helpful or supportive to them because of the stigma of being a welfare recipient; for example one person said that her coworkers were unwilling to swap schedules in an emergency. Supervisors were "sometimes impatient or did not take the time to get to know the abilities of their employees"; some employees felt that their hard work and strengths were not being recognized by supervisors. One person also had problems understanding the work culture and learning how to "relate to people in the right way."

Several participants mentioned feeling overwhelmed with the *immediate removal of AFDC benefits and food stamps*. They said it was difficult to make ends meet during that transition time, until they eventually developed a working budget. Often these benefits were terminated before they actually received their first paycheck, which left them in an immediate emergency situation. One respondent described this as "being pushed out in the cold really quick."

Finally, *transportation difficulties* created a barrier to arriving at work on time which affected potential job success.

Transitions

Reasons for going to work

When asked if they felt like they needed an "extra push" to go ahead and get a job, most respondents said "no," and many said they had always worked, but had just experienced difficult life circumstances. With regard to reasons for starting to work at their current job situation, participants generally discussed *sources of motivation* to work, or *preparedness* for work in terms of skills and education. Several respondents emphasized that they were self-motivated,

giving comments such as: "I just did it" and "I was ready to go." Some people mentioned the need to provide for their family as the reason they went to work; one respondent said, "When you have one more mouth to feed besides yourself, it'll make you do a lot of things you don't want to do...it'll make you want to do more that just sitting around doing nothing." In addition, several participants said that encouragement and support from others helped them build confidence to work; one person said, "you need somebody to talk to give you that confidence." People that provided this encouragement and "push" included family, DSS caseworkers, and God. One woman said "My children inspired me to go back to school." Finally, several respondents mentioned going to school or participating in job skills/preparation programs as reasons they were able to go to work. Two people attended and found the Human Resources Development summer class useful; they both developed life skills and job skills, and soon began working. One got a clinical nursing assistant degree and soon began working, and the other began with volunteer experience before acquiring a full-time job.

Patterns of adjustment to working

Respondents were asked to rate (on a scale of 1 to 10) how they felt they were able to manage their lives before they started working, right after they started working, and now; they were also asked to give reasons for their ratings. The responses were analyzed in terms of the change from the first rating to the second rating (how their feelings about managing their life changed from before work to right after starting work), and the change from the second rating to the third rating (the change from right after starting work to now).

Although transitioning to work was more difficult at the beginning of their job, this stress leveled off and adjustments were made over time. Primary supports for the initial transition to work are related to a positive work situations, being suited to their jobs, more income, and positive self-esteem. Those who reported difficulties with this initial transition reported concern with finances due to removal of benefits, lack of time to manage multiple family-related

responsibilities, and difficult work place adjustments. Additional strategies to maintain balance between work and home included learning personal organizational skills and learning to budget. Appendix 1 provides specific details pertaining to this question.

Strategies for success: Supports received and needed

Effective supports

Participants were asked to name what helped them to be successful at work. They were also asked what information or support they needed as they began their job and what information or support they need now. Effective supports were described as: *emotional support from others, job preparation, internal attitudes, and accessible resources*. Many participants discussed the *emotional support*, encouragement, and honest communication they received as being most helpful to them. This "moral support" came from a variety of sources. Many participants reported receiving this kind of support from their DSS caseworkers, who often listened to the participants' problems and offered encouragement. Comments included:

"She is fantastic,"

"If I felt down, I would call and she would boost me up."

Another person described her caseworker as "very understanding, tolerant, and genuinely interested in my well-being"; several participants strongly appreciated receiving personalized attention from these professionals and being thought of as a "real person with feelings...not just another case number."

Many respondents also received positive personal support from within the workplace. Employers and co-workers gave them appreciation and praise, provided honest and appropriate feedback, were willing to help with job-related matters, showed confidence in them, and gave them added responsibilities. This all helped the participants to feel needed and successful. One person wanted to thank her boss

"for giving me a chance, for believing in me, for thinking I could do a good job...that's what helped me the most in my work."

Another person said that her company offered psychological help in addition to medical benefits, in case she ever needed someone to talk to. Besides the workplace and DSS, other frequently mentioned sources of emotional support were: God (or the Bible), family and friends (who say "You can do it!"), and a few partners (a boyfriend, a fiancé, and a husband).

Many participants felt success as a result of their *skills, education, and/or job preparation*. One respondent emphasized how much it helped

"to be prepared to go in and not feel intimidated, knowing what I know and having that education...having gone to school and graduated."

Several participants had completed degrees or taken courses at community colleges or other schools, some used skills from personal experience (such as using parenting skills to provide child care), many were helped by their previous experience and skills from prior employment, and others benefited from a "job coach," on-the-job training, or other kinds of training in the workplace. Skills and knowledge that were particularly helpful included communication with others, computer skills, and technical training or degrees that directly related to their current job.

Another frequently discussed area that helped participants to be successful at work involved internal attitudes and feelings that they possessed. Respondents mentioned the following as helpful: "my confidence in myself," determination to do a good job, self-reliance, self-motivation, and "individual work ethic," and a "positive mental attitude." One woman felt she was successful mainly because she had a "drive for success and independence" and didn't want to depend on the government.

Another very common category of supports that helped the participants to

succeed was access to resources. This includes financial help with child care, transportation, attending school, and emergency supplies (such as food, clothes, and rent). DSS generally provided all of these services. Several respondents also received assistance in finding good child care from DSS, Day Care Services, and Child Care Connections; some parents emphasized that they were deeply grateful for those child care services. One person said, "I feel more like helping myself, and am more driven, if people are helping me."

Supports needed

In answering these same questions, most respondents indicated some supports that were needed but not received, including needs for *personal support, education and training, accessible resources and services, and information on parenting*. Again, their primary area of need was more *personal or emotional support*. Participants indicated that they would prefer more one-to-one communication between caseworkers and Work First participants, more "concern about the individual," and help with personal problems.

Additionally, many participants noted *education and skills* as a needed area of support; these needs included "more education in order to advance to the next level," more training on the job, help meeting certain production standards, and typing skills.

Resources such as "quality inexpensive child care," transportation, and medical coverage were also seen as needed supports. One woman needed assistance finding child care for her older child (13-yrs-old), and another said that "medical [coverage] worries me to death." Several people also mentioned the need for more accessible and consolidated information on where to go for different supports and services offered by the community.

Finally, one mother needed help with parenting, such as a non-judgmental hotline for parents to call for information and help with difficulties involving their children.

Advice to others

Advice for other Work First participants

Participants were asked their opinions and advice for improving the transition to working. Their advice was sought for the following target audiences: other Work First participants, employers hiring Work First employees, coworkers, Social Services, and community agencies or citizens. For other Work First participants, the most frequent suggestion was to be "persistent" and "determined" even though it is difficult, with comments advising that others "stick with it, don't give up," "hang in there," and "tough it out and not be discouraged although it may seem that you're being deserted...it'll get better."

A second common category of advice involved keeping your life organized, including comments such as, "pace yourself," "stay on top of things," "set priorities," and "try to get on a regular schedule as soon as possible."

Third, several participants recommended that others get education and/or training. For example, one person advised others to "learn to use the computer," and another said that "not only does school give you the skills, but it builds your self-esteem a lot...it makes a big difference in your life."

Advice for employers

When asked what they would want employers to know about hiring Work First employees, participants repeatedly emphasized that employers should give them a chance, avoid stereotyping of welfare recipients as lazy and unskilled, and have trust and confidence in their skills. Comments included:

"We are good workers, if given the chance to prove ourselves."

"Don't hold welfare against me."

"A lot of people are on welfare not because they're shiftless and no good, but because of circumstances beyond their control."

Respondents also advised employers treat Work First employees well, by offering encouragement, compassion, respect, fairness, helpfulness, support, and understanding. More comments included:

"You really need to look at them as people...offer them the support that you would want, were it you."

"Help them fix their mistakes. Give respect and you will get respect."

"Work with them, encourage them to big things, because you feel so intimidated with people who have always been successful."

Finally, participants wanted employers to be more understanding and flexible about family concerns. For example, one person suggested that they "work with moms to meet her time needs so she can take care of her kids.

Advice for coworkers

When asked what they would want coworkers to know, several respondents mentioned that often coworkers do not know whether an employee is a Work First participant. Other responses were similar to those for employers. An overall theme focused on attitudes and interpersonal actions of coworkers; respondents wanted coworkers to be accepting, supportive, respectful, friendly, communicative, open and honest, and encouraging toward Work First participants. Comments included:

"Give us a chance."

"Make us feel like we're part of the team."

"Be patient, informative, communicate."

"Treat us like human beings."

Advice for Social Services

In response to what they would want Social Services to know, the majority

of advice involved attitudes. Participants wanted the DSS workers to be compassionate, patient, encouraging, see the good in people (avoid stereotypes), and, in some cases, to be more informative and nice, rather than resentful, towards welfare recipients. Comments included:

"Return phone calls. Care about us"

"Be supportive and provide 'push' as well."

Several respondents said that their caseworkers already possessed these qualities, and were very appreciative. Many responses also focused on the difficult situation of having just started a job and immediately losing welfare benefits. Suggestions for DSS included:

"Extend transition services to learn to budget and build a little reserve."

"They should wean people off, and cut back gradually instead of cold turkey."

In addition, many people were very appreciative for the services provided by Work First, particularly in the area of child care. One mother mentioned that "Day care means so much to me and my family," while others wanted additional assistance with child care, saying, "They really need to do more in line with child care...you cannot work if you're thinking, what is going on with my child."

Among other less common responses, several people mentioned a desire for more training programs, particularly for computer skills, and perhaps transportation to such programs. Participants also suggested changes in DSS policies and paperwork; one person asked DSS to not be so rigid about paperwork, since it's embarrassing to show an employer all those papers right after starting ("it automatically puts you in a category."). Another person had trouble coming to so many different DSS appointments, and would rather have had one consolidated time to cover everything.

Advice for community agencies

When asked what they would want other community agencies or citizens to know, one issue the respondents discussed was the need for public awareness

about avoiding stereotypes. They want others to look for the good in people and to be respectful and fair. Other suggestions involved job development, such as "Creating real jobs that simple parents can handle," and "Need to get real jobs out there, that single parents can handle." Finally, several participants wanted to thank community agencies for providing emergency resources, and others wanted to make more people aware of services such as these. Respondents' ideas for increased awareness of services included: a community meeting where each program shares its goals, etc., or having the Resident Service Coordinators of housing complexes be able to share that information about Work First and its benefits.

Additional comments

When asked if there was anything else they would like to share that would help in the statewide effort to help people get jobs, participants generally re-emphasized previous points. They discussed their appreciation of DSS and the need to focus on: feelings of self-esteem, self-confidence, pride, a positive attitude, education and training, child care (for young and older children), transportation needs, and creating more accessible jobs.

Workfront-Homefront Team Recommendations

These recommendations are divided as such:

Aspects that primarily affect the *individual*

Aspects that affect the individual *as a parent or family member*

Aspects that affect the individual *in the workplace*

Aspects that affect the *larger community* and its' services

Aspects that affect the *larger welfare infrastructure and system*

Aspects that affect the individual primarily

- Explore ways to enhance one-to-one counseling with Work First participants for moral support and encouragement. Of primary concern to many WF participants is having someone they can contact when they have problems of any kind.

- Explore effective ways to inform participants about educational opportunities, scholarships and resources early on to help them access full community services and outlets.

- Encourage the development of support networks for Work First participants.

- Invite and pay successful Work First participants to assist with training for new workers.

- Supplement current preparation with these topics:
  - Differences among people:How to get along
  - Scheduling and time management
  - Personal wellness and fitness for optimum performance and energy

- Stress management
- Decision making: It's a skill

Aspects that affect the individual as a parent or family member

- Develop a referral partnership between DSS and a CC R & R to help families find quality child care, and bridge financial assistance with child care expenses and transportation.

- Supplement current preparation with these topics:
  - Financial management of the family resources
  - Parenting skills for the busy parent
  - Selecting quality child care

Aspects that affect the individual in the workplace

- Offer worksite workshops to groups of employees as well as groups of management about the following suggested topics:
  -Communication, honesty, and encouragement with co-workers
  -Diversity awareness: Overcoming stereotypying and classism
  -Poverty simulation (ROWELL)
  -Stress induced illness in employees
  -Employer interviews: appropriate questions to ask (ie.,discrimination against marital status and parenthood)

- Inform employers that emotional support and encouragement in new working environments is critical. Provide optional mentoring opportunities for new Work First participants.

- Discuss flex options with employers as a strategy for to new employees to find success and decrease turnover. This would include flex scheduling, support systems, sick child care options, and health and wellness issues that

affect individuals.

- Encourage employers to provide staff development opportunities, and where appropriate to provide opportunities for additional training/education for job advancement.

- Develop ways to more thoroughly advertise job opportunities.

Aspects that affect the larger community and services

- Inform WF participants about the services that exist in the community. Examples might include:

-- booklets that lists and explains services available for families in the area (such as JTPA, Child Care Connections, etc.)

-- holding community resource meetings for WF participants where different service-providing agencies come and explain what they do and who to contact

- Create community systems of collecting used business clothes, jewelry, etc., from people in the community for people just starting a professional wardrobe.

- Inquire with public transportation systems about the possibility of expanding bus routes and extending hours of service in certain areas. Strengthen the availability of public transportation where none exists.

- Seek ways to increase accessibility to educational and job skill training programs by particularly looking at individual participant needs for transportation and child care.

- Utilize experienced Work First participants to help new participants through the transition into full-time employment.

- Develop community public awareness pieces for community groups to discount stereotypes of this population to ease community tension and encourage employment to market Work First with a positive, upbeat context.

- Inquire with the mental health system about instituting flexible hours. New workers may have children with complex problems due to multiple life stressors and they cannot jeopardize their tenuous work situation to obtain counseling services as frequently as necessary to truly be helpful to their children.

- Promote development of quality child care in local communities. This child care should provide services for those persons on shift work as well as with weekend employment.

- Provide transportation for after-school programs so children can arrive at these programs safely.

- Promote community awareness of the need for more after-school programs for older children (aged 12 and older).

- Additional information about these issues should be covered with WF participants:
  - difficult transitions from school to working full-time
  - conducting a job search (how to locate appropriate jobs to apply for)
  - time management
  - basic skills courses and literacy .
  - parenting while working-easily accessible resources or a hotline

Aspects that affect the larger welfare infrastructure and system

- Explore modifications of current eligibility standards to ease the financial transition from welfare to self-sufficiency by extending benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid for a few months after beginning a full-time job, or gradually decreasing benefits.

- Seek ways to consolidate various appointments for different services into one visit; WF participants often have great difficulty coming to numerous appointments because of transportation problems and busy schedules.

Extension's Contributions:

The Department of Family and Consumer Sciences proposes writing the following publications:

Four-six page Publications to be used to teach WF participants and for WF participant use.

- Differences among people: How to get along at home and work (including communication and difference among people as well as developing personal networks)
- Personal wellness for optimum performance and energy
- Parenting skills for the busy parent of a preschooler
- Easing transitions (balancing work and family, relationships, scheduling and time, health issues)

One page easy reference fact sheet:

- Locating and selecting child care
- Decision making: It's a skill
- Community Building publications to be shared among community agencies wanting to take supporting local Work First efforts. These would include topics such as initiating community support systems (clothing bank, listing of services, job fairs, starting participant run support networks, community

awareness, recruitment of child care providers)

Work Front - Home Front
Interviews with Work First Employers

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To investigate sustainability with the Work First effort, the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service Human Development Specialists developed a partnership with the Department of Human Resources Economic Independence unit. In addition to conducting telephone interviews with Work First participants, the research team also contacted employers of Work First employees. Accessing employers of Work First participants occured in various ways. Referrals through the local Departments of Social Services in Wake and Guilford county in addition to the advisory board of the Center for Employment Training in Durham were excellent sources for referrals.

RESULTS

The pool of respondents included 12 employer contacts; the majority were Human Resources workers. Others included one business manager, one business owner, a Vice President for Economic Development, and one worksite director of training. Ten of the employers were reported by DSS to have hired Work First participants recently, and two had recently hired participants who had attended a job skills training program. All of the respondents were reached by telephone, but five were not able to answer any interview questions in detail, because they did not know who among their employees were previous Work First participants. Several respondents indicated that they would like to have the list of which workers were WF participants; one person said,

"That's information I would dearly love to have, because of my own tracking. I would like to know the turnover rate, compared to the other sources that I use."

Employers who were unaware of which workers were WF participants, said This knowledge "wouldn't make any difference to us...it's based upon the individual's job performance; we could really care less, from that respect."

Seven employers were able to respond to the interview questions. Six of these contacts said they definitely knew which of their employees were previous welfare recipients, and one said he had a general, but not definite, idea of which employees had moved off of welfare. One employer was also able to talk with her area managers about the interview questions and represeted their collective input.

NUMBER OF WF EMPLOYEES

When asked about how many previous welfare recipients they have employed, two contacts said they currently had two people in their section of the larger organization (they did not know about the entire organization). Employers had also had experience with several other previous welfare recipients in the past. Three employers estimated that their companies had hired four to six as employees.

JOB PERFORMANCE

When asked how they felt about the WF participants' job performance, responses varied. Several employers were very pleased with their performance, and gave comments such as:

"excellent...both of them are doing quite well...If I could clone them, I would do so."

"To my knowledge, all the ones that I've been associated with have performed to the expectations."

Other employers reported that the employees who "worked out" were good, but that there had been problems with other WF participants. Concerns with workers basically included *personal difficulties and work attendance*. One employer noted a substance abuse problem and an abusive relationships as factors that undermined her employees ability to work. Employers reported that workers with young children in day care presented obstacles to keeping regular work hours;

"Sometimes when the day care center calls it creates a problem...it just seems to happen at the most inopportune times for me...but she does her best to resolve it, and she's working on a backup plan,"

However, this same person commented:

"if I had to rehire them over again, even knowing that (about child care issues) I would do that."

Relative to work attendance, employers indicated that workers did a good job when they were on the job, but there were problems with consistency in work attendance combined with a failure to notify employers of impending absences.

"It wasn't so much the quality of work when they were there, but *were* they going to be there."

ADVANTAGES

Employers were asked about advantages and disadvantages of hiring Work First participants. Advantages primarily included *worker committment, DSS as extra added support, and well trained workers*. Comments included:

"this taps a new labor market of dedicated and committed workers,"

"they want to work and employers find the process of going through the WF program helpful."

"If we weren't going through that WF program and these people just came in and applied for a job, the chances that we would hire them would be almost zilch, because we wouldn't have any confidence that they were going to be a good employee," but because they are in WF, "we know they're part of a program that's working with them, helping develop their skills."

Another benefit of going through the WF program for her was working directly with the WF caseworkers; One employer commented:

"we like having that third party involved," especially if there is a problem, because, "if we feel uncomfortable going to that employee, we'd feel comfortable going to their counselor, and say this person has this problem you need to work on."

Advanced training was another advantage reported by several of employers. In a training program conducted through the Women's Center, one employer reported that the workers came to her well-prepared, but had failed to "stick with it". Another indicated :

"one good thing for me was that they were already qualified on the forklift...they knew everything, which was a benefit to me, which helped me get them through [the licensing class] quickly...the training curve wasn't as large as it would have been [without their prior training]...they even had experience in shipping."

DISADVANTAGES

Primary disadvantages include: *lack of training skills, attendance problems and transportation arrangements*. .Although training was cited as a positive aspect in the previous question, it was also noted as a disadvantage when employees were under training however, one employer said that the workers

> "catch on very quickly and...have had no problems adjusting...it's just a weak area."

This is compounded by some difficulty in

> "being adjusted to the corporate environment" because "a lot of the jobs they held before may not have been as structured as the one that they are in now."

Regular attendance presents some problems for employers. Employers feel that some employees

> "don't understand you have to show up when expected,"
>
> "Especially Monday morning – not showing up at all on Mondays,"

and

> some employees seemed to "last only until their first pay check and then disappear."

According to several employers, difficulties with transportation is an ongoing problem. For some, work sites are in remote areas that are not serviced by bus routes, and because many WF participants do not have cars, it is very difficult to place these people into jobs.

Some interesting observations, but only noted by one employer each was that many WF participants want full-time positions but most of the available positions are only part-time; and many WF participants are screened out after the criminal records check, so that "there are few people left that we can hire."

TURNOVER

When asked whether they had experienced greater turnover among these employees, responses varied with some noting high turnover--as high as 98%--, while others indicated no noticable turnover saying :

> the workers have "very good on attendance, very punctual...one of them has only used one sick day in a year, and the only time the other one needs to take sick time is to take care of her child."

> "It hasn't been that noticeable...I would say they had blended in with the rest of the working group."

At least one employer indicated that the criminal records check eliminated otherwise qualified applicants before they could start work saying:

> "it wasn't so much the turnover as...once they screened their criminal records history, that seems to get rid of people."

REASONS FOR LEAVING AND/OR HAVING ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS

Respondents were asked about why they felt that some workers have stayed on the job while others have left, and why some have done well while others have had adjustment problems. Responses to these two questions were very similar.

Employers indicated that the main reason for turnover and employees' dissatisfaction with their job was *number of hours, work preparedness and adjustment, and fearing loss of benefits*.

> "They want more hours, that's the big one."

> "The job was too hard, that they were not expecting it to be such difficult work,"

"Maybe the technical aspect of the job that they may not possess, all the necessary training...lack of education and training is a big factor, the primary factor."

"Personal problems, either with their children or something going on in their life," "poor attitude...easily agitated over small matters...they didn't have a good history of how to deal with personal conflict, work conflict,"

Losing benefits such as housing and Medicaid was exacerbated by the difficult and "too complex" process of trying to verify their earnings for DSS when they were starting out as a substitute worker. This employer also mentioned that part of the poor attitude was that

"the employees felt like they were being forced to work...It wasn't that 'I want to work,' it was that 'I have to find a job'."

REASONS FOR STAYING ON THE JOB AND/OR DOING WELL

Employers seemed to agree that employees were successful because they wanted to keep their good job. Employers commented:

"I think a lot of it has been their past experience, and they realize that, I work for a great company...the pay is very well, and excellent benefits...they have a good position and they want to maintain it, they work very hard to do that."

"A lot of it is the desire for the work and the job...I've heard a lot of them tell us it's a great place to work, and they enjoy the work and the camaraderie...it's an individual desire for employment, to get ahead, and those that have that desire seem to progress ahead of the others that don't."

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION THE WORKERS COULD HAVE USED

When asked what additional information the employees could use to make the transition to full-time work, several employers indicated a need for help with transportation and child care arrangements in addition to time and money management skills for employees. But there was a greater focus on training issues, saying,

> "most of the ones that are in that category do not possess the experiences, skills, and education level."

Employers also focused on the employees' social and emotional needs indicating that WF workers are very defensive and overreact if they feel like co-workers are being critical of their performance.

Managers observed that:

> " these people as have great emotional problems and needs"

> "they need better preparation on how to enter the work force, and how to be successful when they get in."

> "these are not normal people who need a job, they are needy people...they need much closer assistance in the emotional, social areas."

Managers felt like the WF employees:

> "need more counseling and self-worth...self-control, how to work with others,"

"more help with "self-esteem"

to be "enlightened on what to expect from a larger company" before they started, because "some of the things that they're subjected to now, like training, they weren't subjected to before, and a lot of times they're kind of apprehensive and nervous about going into that type of environment."

EMPLOYERS PROVIDE SUPPORT

When asked about what sorts of things the employers have done to assure the employees' job success or to ease the transition to working full-time, several employers mentioned offering additional training. Employers said:

"We've offered to train personnel to become qualified in their particular jobs,"

"We have jobs of lesser certification levels – and when a person does not perform at the level that they may be trying to achieve, we also offer them a lesser level in order to get them to stay."

"We have a very good training program...our new hires. They go through benefits and everything of that nature, and at that point they're subjected to being in a group atmosphere," which helps them to feel comfortable in the work setting.

"We have computer classes, we have writing classes, we have several different classes just to improve your self-awareness, your self-esteem, and just improve yourself as a whole."

Personally, one employer reported going and picking up a employee with transportation problems, although she did state that she really didn't feel she could maintain that level of involvement. One employer gave support and encouragement to workers who were nervous about attending classes and group meetings saying:

"I tell them, you just have to be yourself, and go in with the attitude that you are just as important as the next person"

"You have to be with them the whole time, and continually tell them that they're doing great, and just reinforce them – and then as time goes on, you see them getting confident."

An Employer reported she has attended two Work First "Job Club" meetings that participants are required to attend (in which they discuss employment-related issues such as interviewing and professional dress). During these meetings, speakers

"talked specifically about the school system, what kind of jobs we needed, what kind of vacancies we had, who to contact...I walked them through the application...and it was very helpful to them."

"it shows you a whole side of the world that I don't see...I mean, these ladies want to work...I was impressed with them...they were very unique individuals...and that's where we got several of the people who applied."

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION EMPLOYERS COULD HAVE USED

Employers were asked what additional information they could use to prepare or train these workers. One employer stated:

> "We want to understand their needs--particularly social and emotional needs-- then we could be more successful at finding the right positions for them. We want to set them up to win!"

LEARNING TOPICS FOR TRAINING MANUALS

When asked for suggestions of additional resources to assist employers and community agencies in job preparation, employers had varied responses. Several employers emphasized "proper dress attire" as an important area for people preparing workers to focus on; saying that employees were dressed well for the interview, but had trouble dressing properly "just day to day" on the job. One employer said that the workers seemed to be unaware of how to dress, probably because they had not been in this type of situation or atmosphere before, and that "if they knew that from the beginning, based on what type of position they were going into, then they would already know that would not be the proper way to come in." Other job related issues such as dependability and a willingness to allow time for adjustment to the job were also mentioned.

One employer discussed issues concerning the personal needs of WF employers and DSS workers. One employer stressed that each Work First participant is an individual; some are very professional and have many abilities, and some have great difficulties. She emphasized that employers should interact with WF participants differently according to individual qualities and needs, because "there's not a cookie cutter Work First participant."

She emphasized that these workers "need an employer who's willing to work with them, and to have some patience, and to be honest with them...helping [them] develop those skills." She suggested that this process might be improved by more interaction between the employer, employee, and Work First

caseworker, perhaps during a meeting once a year or semester where all three sit down as a group and talk. Finally, she emphasized how much fear she detected in the WF participants she talked to; they were very afraid of losing their benefits. Her comments included:

> "there was just a lot of fear in these ladies. It wasn't that they didn't want to work, but they've got to stay alive. And if their children suddenly don't have health insurance, or they no longer have a place to live because now they have a low-paying job...they just have this fear that, 'if I succeed, I'm going to fail.' It's like we've set them up for failure."

OTHER COMMENTS

When asked for additional comments, two employers stated that WF participants' benefits should not be cut off right after they start working; they thought the WF participants should be able to use the extra money from working for a while, to continue to develop their skills and to take care of their children, parents, or whoever needs their support. One employer wanted lawmakers to realize that,

> "these ladies want to work, but you can't take them in a year or two years, from being totally dependent on the government, to being totally self-sufficient. It just won't happen."

Another employer suggested that Social Services and human service agencies offer evening and weekend hours so that employee do not have to miss work. One employer expressed concern about child care issues. She stated, "Kids need attention. Children need a good start." One employer also expressed a desire to see churches in local communities get involved with welfare reform and providing support to the persons in their communities who it would affect.

One respondent indicated that for communities to be supportive of these new workers, there needs to be awareness on many fronts. There needs to be a partnership between business and government. Work First counselors can visit the Chambers of Commerce and other businesses to inform Chamber membership about WF program goals. There could be seminars about tax incentives to hire Work First participants. I recommend forming partnerships to cultivate linkages with whoever does economic development with the service delivery to Work First.

> "Social workers and Work First staff need to regularly share with economic developers, Chambers of Commerce, and business leaders to know where the jobs are. Basic exposure to the nature of the labor market will tell you where the jobs are." There should be a community goal to "team together for the betterment of the community."
>
> " If we put effort into this it can be as successful as the RTP. There is an economic as well as a social reason to make this work!"

Recommendations

- Develop a (or distribute an existing) community educational piece about the advantages of hiring Work First participants.
- Develop a process piece for communities about how to work with the Work First program.
- Develop a training outline with experiential learning processes about being a part of a team for employers as well as employees.

- Develop a training outline with experiential learning processes about positive work habits.

- Develop an awareness piece for employers about motivating staff.

- Explore possibilites of automatic screening of criminal records prior to referring workers for jobs where background checks could result in employee embarassment and immediate job terminiation.

- Encourage more open communication between the employee, employer, and WF caseworker (if necessary) to facilitate the employee's adjustment to work; periodic meetings could be scheduled to discuss how to handle child care difficulties, attendance, job responsibilities, channels to seek assistance.

- Inquire with public transportation systems about expanding bus routes to service work sites in remote areas.

- Explore ways to communicate between DSS and employers to verify earnings in order to keep benefits; if this process were made easier and less complex for employers, this would significantly reduce the stress experienced by new employees who are fearful of losing benefits such as housing and Medicaid.

- Study employer programs that are able to build self-esteem and discover their "best practices" to share with others.

- Broadly market opporunities such as job fairs or "Job Clubs."

Table 1

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Appendix 1

Table 1

Sample Profile

Race	Gender	Age range	Marital Status	Children's ages	Total children
African American 15	Female 30	22-50 years	Married 4	2-17 years	57 Range=1-4 children
Euro-American 16	Male 1	Mean=37	Single 27	Mean=9 years	Mean per family 1.9

Appendix 1

Detailed description of the difficulty transitioning to work and balancing family

For the transition *from before work to right after starting work*, responses varied. A majority of respondents (45%) reported an improvement in their feelings about managing their life, but many others (32%) said that their ability to manage their lives declined as they began their jobs. Among those who reported an improvement, their situation before working was rated lower due to factors such as: financial difficulties living on AFDC benefits, being depressed, having nothing to do, low self-esteem, and having to get help from others. Reasons for the improvement right after starting to work included: improved personal feelings (such as increased self-esteem, feelings of self-reliance, and improved attitude toward all responsibilities), a love for their job (including enjoying the work and liking the supervisor), and their income from work (having an increased income, making their own money, and being able to pay their bills).

Among those who reported a decline, several participants mentioned that they were doing better before they started working because they had more time, were able to balance things, and could get more done. Reasons for the decline after beginning the job included: time management problems (feeling overwhelmed, being in "total chaos," and having difficulty juggling everything), difficulties with the new job (having trouble with the new responsibilities and added pressures, having irregular hours, and not being used to the job), and money problems (having financial difficulty when benefits were terminated, or being worried about benefits being terminated).

A small percentage of respondents (19%) gave the same rating of ability to manage their lives for before working and right after starting to work. This group was fairly evenly divided between positive descriptions of the change (being able to balance household chores well, having increased income) and negative descriptions (having a lot to learn about the job, and being fearful about letting

go of AFDC). One person said the job did not make any difference in her life.

For the transition *from after starting work to now*, most responses (77%) were positive – either improvements (45%) or continuous positive ratings (48%). One reason for this positive change involved becoming more personally organized, such as learning to budget; as one person said, "I finally got myself together." Other factors included: getting used to the job in a positive way (adjusting to the schedule, learning more about the job, and experiencing success on the job), experiencing a change in their job (such as increased pay or more regular hours), and having greater self-esteem and confidence. Reasons for giving a repeated positive rating, which had stayed the same from the beginning of the job to now, involved liking the job (wanting to do the work, feeling needed by clients, and liking the boss) and positive personal feelings (such as self-esteem and attitude toward responsibilities).

One person reported a decline, which was due to difficulty meeting job production standards. Three people gave repeated ratings with ambivalent feelings about their situation (such as feeling that things "could be worse, could be better," and liking the job but being worried that it may end), and two people gave repeated negative ratings, citing continued time management problems and hectic lives. One person stated, "It's hard, but I have to accept it; it's what I have to do."